GERMANY DM 5.30/SPAIN PTS 350/US $3.75

LIVE! MENSWE@R ★ ECHOBELLY ★ STONE ROSES ★ MARION ★ BOSS HOG

MELODY MAKER

THOM THOM CLUB

October 28, 1995 75p

PULP
'Different Class' LP review

ST ETIENNE
The perfect pop band?

OASIS
New bassist quits US tour

BLUR
New single: full details

RADIOHEAD
America gets 'The Bends'

PASSENGERS ★ THE AMPS ★ GREEN DAY ★ ERASURE ★ LOOP GURU
60FT DOLLS ★ CYPRESS HILL PLUS WIN A CASIO CTK-630 KEYBOARD

RADIOHEAD - Photographed by PAT POPE

43
9 770025 901040

SHINY UNHAPPY

Lorry seems to be the hardest word; oh, for truck's sake, etc, etc – Radiohead 'hit' America, autumn '95 (l-r): Cuddly Colin, Jumpin' Jonny, Tooled-up Thom, Phunky Phil and Big Ed

PEOPLE*

***Only kidding. RADIOHEAD aren't solely responsible for the Culture Of Despair. But they are prone to the occasional spot of miserabilist navel-gazing, and they have just been on tour with R.E.M. in America. ANDREW MUELLER, who isn't alone in considering 'The Bends' the best album of '95, observed the two bands' mutual appreciation society first-hand.**
Disunited states: PAT POPE

"IT'S A VERY GOOD IDEA," nods Thom Yorke. "It's not the idea I'm arguing with. The idea, in itself, is fine."

Thom is sitting, shrouded in his enormous fake black fur coat, on a luggage trolley in the foyer of Hartford's Sheraton Hotel. He's just stumbled off the tour bus from Philadelphia. A bow-tied porter hovers uncertainly in the background, as if unsure whether to move Thom along, or just ask him which room he'd like to be wheeled to. Bass player Colin Greenwood is crouched in front of him, earnestly outlining his plans.

"My question," continues Thom, at pains to sound reasonable, "is where the f***ing hell we're going to find 500 ping-pong balls at short notice in this f***ing place on a Sunday afternoon."

There's a pensive silence. Thom has a fair point. We could hardly find a beer in Hartford at eleven o'clock last night.

"We'll just have to think of something else," says Thom, and chews on one thumbnail.

THE BENDS PART ONE: TOUR MADNESS WITH THOM

"THERE was a period during this tour where I felt incredibly homesick and frustrated and just kept having these strange, strange days. . . one day we woke up on the bus and we were stumbling around and it was really dark outside, like there was about to be a storm. So we were all putting on hats and raincoats, and wandered out, and looked round. . . oh. We're inside the gig."

WASHED and changed an hour later, we pile into the minibus to the venue, and Colin explains the above exchange. Tonight, Radiohead will play the last of their shows on R.E.M.'s American tour, and have been warned to expect some sort of practical joke by way of farewell. Believing that revenge is a dish best served pre-cooked, Radiohead (Thom, Colin, drummer Phil Selway, guitarists Ed O'Brien and Jonny Greenwood – from whom, presumably, Thom stole the "h") have been plotting retribution in advance.

"Mike Mills," explains Colin, "told us not to wear anything we want to wear again."

"Paint," speculates Thom, gloomily. "It'll be paint. Or custard pies. Oh, God."

"So the idea with the ping-pong balls," continues Colin, "was that we'd get the crew in the lighting gantries in the roof to drop them on R.E.M. during their last song."

A contemplative silence settles as we drive through Hartford. If you've never driven through Hartford, the effect can be duplicated in the comfort and safety of your home by going to sleep. The venue, the Meadows Music Arena, sits like a crash-landed spacecraft in a vast car park. Inside, things get stranger still. The lot of the journalist backstage is not generally a happy one. Usually, you're approached by laminate-laden jobsworths who ask two questions: i) Who the f*** are you?; ii) What the f*** are you doing here? This afternoon, however, I am accosted by cheerful, helpful people saying, "Hi! Where are you from?" and, "Hey! How are you?".

"Yeah," nods Thom, "it does seem more like a Christian revival rally than a rock'n'roll tour at times, but they've been brilliant to us, they really have."

In Radiohead's dressing room, Thom draws a smiling face, and the caption, "Thanks for having us, you've been brilliant, love Radiohead", on a piece of paper to be secreted among the sheets on Stipe's lyric stand. Gratitude notwithstanding, a Plan B has been hatched. The idea now is that, as R.E.M. close their show with "It's The End Of The World (As We Know It)", the enormous red lampshades that dance across the backdrop will be joined in flight by Radiohead, suspended from harnesses.

In the meantime, Radiohead soundcheck (they've been getting an hour, every night – ask any band that's ever supported another how often that happens in real life). Teasing snatches of "Radio Free Europe" emerge between songs. They wouldn't dare, surely. Radiohead return to their dressing room to be told that the harness jape is off – R.E.M.'s tour manager isn't having it. They'll have to settle for running across the stage with monster lampshades over their heads. Phil tries one on. He looks silly beyond description. "I can't see," he announces.

"Typical," snorts Thom, momentarily recalling, as he sometimes does, the mock-nasty snarl of John Lydon. "Very bloody Keith Moon, aren't we?"

He goes back to drawing things on his Mac laptop, and waits in silence for showtime. Jonny tries to evade an interview with the local radio station. He asks if I fancy doing it. "They'll never know," he says. He explains that several foreign magazines, especially in Japan and Taiwan, currently trailing Radiohead exclusives, are in fact running with the thoughts of his mates, cousins or anyone else who was sitting around his house when the phone rang. "Go on," he goads. "It's easy. How are you finding touring with R.E.M.? Do you feel under pressure to follow the success of 'Creep'?"

Jonny's ambition is to leave America having said "Wanker" and "Bollocks" on every radio station in the country.

THE BENDS PART TWO: TOUR MADNESS WITH THOM

"WE did a session at this station in Dallas. Natalie Merchant was playing this show as well, and we walked in and the first thing this woman running it said was 'So, we hear Natalie Merchant's a real bitch'. This is live on radio. So we said, well, we haven't met her, but we hear you're a complete cow, and it went downhill from there. 'Creep' was the only thing she'd play after that."

IN the event, after much agonising, Radiohead decide not to storm the stage looking like Devo after a gig in downwind Kiev. After the show, R.E.M. and Radiohead convene their mutual admiration society for one last session of handshakes, hugs, and conversations in dark corners of dressing rooms. Every friend or relative of every member of R.E.M. makes both bands stand together for souvenir shots; Pat Pope has been quietly advised that any attempt on his part to get in on the act might result in an abrupt cessation of goodwill to all people from R.E.M.'s crew, so you'll have to imagine it.

Colin brings me a beer, because he is the most remorselessly pleasant person in the whole world.

'. . . three, four, five. . . ' Thom gives the world '10' to get out of his sight

So. Colin. How are you finding touring with R.E.M.? Do you feel under pressure to follow the success of "Creep"?

"It's been brilliant," he says. "I mean, I remember listening to 'Reckoning' and things on my Walkman on my way to exams at school, you know? And they've been so good to us, and it's been really, really good for us. Especially Thom. This seems to have been his year for meeting his heroes. Like, Elvis Costello came up and introduced himself at this thing we did in Italy. I think that kind of thing has helped him a lot."

> **'How rich are we? One moment we'll have half a million in the bank, the next we'll have nothing. It's all about cash flow'**
> **– Thom**

Bill Berry comes over to say goodbye. He's wearing a purple Radiohead tour T-shirt.

THE BENDS PART THREE: TOUR MADNESS WITH THOM

"THERE was an incident in Finland, where we did this arts festival. We'd done one encore, and come on for another one, and I noticed this girl down the front going 'Get off, get off' to some bloke. And he was basically feeling her up, this bloke, behind her, and this girl was really frantic. But he was also the guy who'd jumped on to stage three or four songs beforehand.

"So the best moment of the show for me was when after him having molested this girl and me gone over and made faces at him, he climbed on stage again and received my guitar in his bollocks. Such a graceful movement. Made my day."

I CATCH up with Thom again in New York next evening. Radiohead are playing a secret gig at the Mercury, a venue on East Houston. We head for a coffee in a place up the street. The waitress, one of New York's hardened indie-anglophiles, is wearing a Sleeper T-shirt. She double-takes at Thom but evidently can't place him. She carries on double-taking at him while we sit there.

"The thing that's really freaked me out doing a tour with a band as big as R.E.M.," he begins, "is seeing how being so famous can change the way that everybody, absolutely everybody, behaves towards you."

Someone once wrote that the curse of being Marlon Brando was that you'd never see people being themselves.

"Absolutely. And it is really hard to do, be yourself in front of somebody famous. I find it. . . f***, you know, I don't want that to happen. But that's presuming we're even going to make another record that people like."

Colin was saying last night that you'd found meeting a few of these people helpful. What happens? Do you have those artistic conversations artists want people to believe artists have, or do you stand there gawping like a fan?

"No, it's more. . . you're there, there's millions of things you can ask, but the fact that you've met them becomes enough. Even someone like Elvis Costello you can still judge on first impressions to some degree, and he was really nice, really trying to be nice. I mean, he can obviously be extremely sour, just like I can be, just like a lot of people under pressure can be, but he was nice.

"The music business is quite a bitchy and competitive thing, and then after all that to meet people you really admire, and suddenly that whole competitive thing is gone, just not important. I found that helpful. Just being able to say I've met him. That's enough."

So you just talk shop like everyone else.

"I bloody hope not. Although, to some degree, you find yourself in the same boat, having gone through the same experiences, and they're quite a limited set of experiences, and they turn you into quite a limited personality. So it's – I think – principally a shock when you discover that there other people who have gone through that, are a few years ahead in the time machine, and have come back and said, you know, it's all right, I'm still alive."

That was the common take on "The Bends", the song, that it was railing against the way that stardom, rather than the liberating force people imagine, is in fact incredibly limiting and ultimately cretinising. It reminded me of Costello's "Hand In Hand", and "Pump It Up", or Nirvana's "Pennyroyal Tea" or "Serve The Servants", that I've-got-what-I-always-wanted-and-I-don't-want-it vibe.

"Well, no. . . that song was really just a collection of phrases going around in my head one day. The crazy thing about that song is that there was no calculation or thought involved. It was just whatever sounded good after the previous line. It was written way before we'd ever been to America, even, but it's always interpreted as this strong reaction against. . ."

It's an understandable response. All those sleepy-eyed views from aeroplane windows, the alcohol drip-feed, the fear that the surface everyone sees is all you've got left. . .

"Oh, absolutely, but that hadn't started at all. I wrote it before we recorded 'Pablo Honey'. We hadn't been anywhere. Is that the time?"

It is. Half an hour till showtime. I pay for the coffees while Thom polishes his shades outside. The waitress, meanwhile, has figured it out. Yes, I tell her, it's the guy who sang "Creep". Radiohead, yes. Up the street, in half an hour. Sold out, I think. Keep the change.

THE BENDS PART FOUR: TOUR MADNESS WITH THOM

"WE did this awful promo thing in Vancouver, just me and Jonny. Jonny had his amps, I had my acoustic guitar. It was a Friday night, and the audience was a mixture of people who'd left work, and people who had been set up by the record company to come to this vibey – that's my new favourite record company word – vibey gig.

"And one table down the front just got louder and louder and louder. I just stopped one song and said 'Look, we've gone all round the world on this tour, but you are the

rudest f***ers we've ever met.' There was this complete silence, and then they started talking again, but this time the rest of the crowd just moved in on them, and there was this huge fight. There's me and Jonny playing 'Fake Plastic Trees', and people throwing each other over tables."

STREWN around the Mercury after a typically incendiary show are record company flyers for "The Bends". The flyers trumpet a few excerpts of the critical praise that "The Bends" has attracted, from the delightfully double-meaning ("Radiohead toss and turn like the best Pearl Jam and U2 anthems" – People) to the plain worrying ("Thom Yorke's voice is as enigmatic as Billy Corgan's" – LA Times; "Jesus, thanks a f***ing bunch" – Thom). Colin is more perturbed by the line from Rolling Stone. "It's four stars in quote marks," he says. "Does that mean they just swore at it?"

There's a record company party across the road which we get to after Radiohead have finished saying thanks to everyone who's hung around on the pavement to tell them they're, like, really awesome, and after Thom has accepted the apologies of a girl whose heckling boyfriend came very close to having Thom's guitar shoved down his neck. After everyone's shaken hands with everyone else at the party and had a drink or several, we repair to our lodgings, the painfully fashionable Paramount Hotel. Here, we stage a chaotic photo session, interrupted by Jonny's incredulous readings from the in-house video library catalogue ("I'll give anyone five dollars to ring downstairs and ask for 'Honey, I Blew Everybody'").

Thom and I eventually head downstairs to a table overlooking the Paramount's foyer, a pop-art hallucination concocted by Phillip Starck. We order several beers. Thom is on good form, having enjoyed the gig and, unusually, the meet'n'greet afterwards.

"I was great, wasn't I?" he laughs. "A complete tart. It is unusual, yes. I was nice to people tonight because I thought we'd done a fairly OK gig, and I was really buzzing because normally I have the earplugs in, but I took them out tonight because it wasn't that loud. So I had all that howling guitar noise in my head, so I could get through it."

What happened with that bloke down the front?

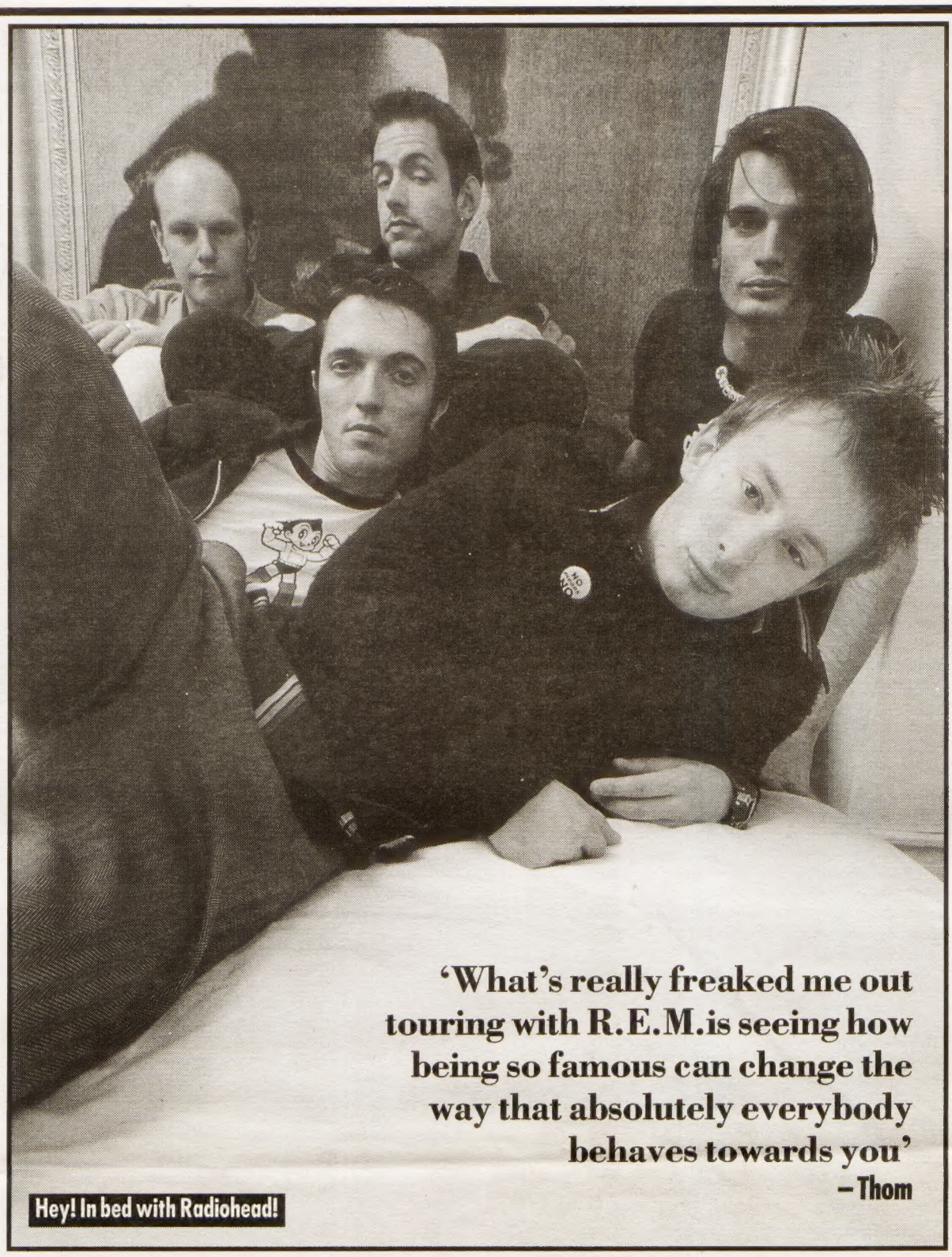
"He was just particularly rude, and he was pissing other people off as well. It's one of those things. You can feel really awkward really quickly. If someone is goading me as well, I do react aggressively, because I am actually quite embarrassed. So I said. . . well, we had a few words."

This is the third time Thom has been interviewed by MM this year. The first time, The Stud Brothers wrote a typically compelling piece about a viciously self-loathing borderline misogynist, which freaked Thom out to the point that he spent most of the second interview, with Caitlin Moran, refuting every conclusion the Studs had come to.

"Ultimately," he sighs tonight, "I have a problem with the written word. Things on video, on radio, they're here and then they're gone, whereas stuff in the press sticks around."

Can you see a day when you'll stop doing interviews?

"No, that's really crap. You can't address it by not addressing it. I really like the idea of being exactly who I want all the time, and being Thom from Radiohead, having had a few drinks and not having slept properly for days, and this is what you get. And you can write what you like, because I'm not gonna f***ing read it. Or if I do, I won't read the whole thing, because if I did, then the next time we met, or the next time I met someone like you, I would be worrying about you will and won't print. Oh dear. Fashion victim."



'What's really freaked me out touring with R.E.M. is seeing how being so famous can change the way that absolutely everybody behaves towards you'
– Thom

Hey! In bed with Radiohead!

Yorke peers over the glass balcony at a tottering mannequin, bulging out of a dress that could scarcely be less comfortable if it was made of nettles.

"Dear oh dear. . . it's the Versace jeans that cost £300 and still look like jeans; I like."

I've never understood the point of spending that much money on something you'll only spill coffee on.

"Makes you feel good."

Yeah? How many bathmats died to make that coat, then?

"Very good. Colin bought a suit for £900, which I thought was pretty good going, but he only wears it every now and again. Doesn't want to get it dirty. I had a lovely pair of £100 sunglasses, but they got nicked."

So (usual decorum suspended due to increasing drunkenness), have you made a load of money?

"Errrrr. . . Ed's the person to ask, because I find it all ultra-confusing. One moment we'll have half a million in the bank, the next moment we'll have nothing. Ed keeps saying, 'It's all right, it's all about cash flow. It'll all come through in the next six months.'"

You want to watch him. He'll be sipping mint julep on his Brazilian plantation while the rest of you are busking at Oxford station.

"Yeah. . . bloody hell."

Thom's squinting over the balcony again, this time at one of the alabaster goddesses that the Paramount seems to pay to saunter languidly about the building.

She's looking at me, Thom.

"Yeah, they all are. . . it's when they start coming up to you and saying hello that you get completely freaked out."

Happen often, does it?

"Nah. I mean, yes, Andrew, yes, it happens all the f***ing time. I mean, nah. The crew cop off a lot more than we do."

Always the way. Though that can be a richly vicariously amusing spectacle. If you're into other people's squalor, that is.

"That's the essence of good sex, isn't it? That borderline between extremely cheap and extremely beautiful, that duplicity about it. But someone coming up after a show and invading your body space ridiculously, or. . . being in a lift! I was in the lift earlier, with my fur coat on, and this woman – she's obviously into teddy bears or something – got in the lift, and was, like, stroking me, and her opening line was 'Oh, we're in the green lift'. Maybe I should wear my coat more often."

'I was in the lift earlier with my fur coat on, and this woman was, like, stroking me. . .'
– Thom

Thom smiles, which he does a lot more than he's given credit for. He's relaxed into his role a lot more this year, but the assumption that it's other people's love of his work that spooks him most still seems a fair one.

"There's a few key words. . . sorry, you're asking for my hard disk, and only the RAM's working at the moment. Um, they say it's beautiful, and then they say nice stuff about the way I sing and the atmospheres and things like that. Which I find quite weird. I was trying to get away from that with 'The Bends'. By printing them, I was trying to burst the bubble, saying they're just words, it's. . . "

They're important, though. You wouldn't write them otherwise.

"The problem is having to deliver that sense of importance all the time. That's where the problem lies, because then you get into that Morrissey territory of contriving situations simply to perpetuate the way that you think people think you are."

How do you rate yourself as a lyricist?

"Inconsistent. Definitely inconsistent."

What's the best one you've written?

(I think it's "Fake Plastic Trees", a gorgeous, human, intelligent song, or "Street Spirit", which Colin describes as a song "About what's left when there's nothing left".)

There's a very long pause.

"'*Suck your teenage thumb,*'" he decides. "'*Toilet trained and dumb/When the power runs out we'll just hum/This is our new song/Just like the last one/Total waste of time/My iron lung.*'"

Odd looks from the waitresses. Thom continues.

"Some woman gave me 'Highway 61 Revisited' the other day saying 'Thom, you're a poet, listen to this'. I listened to it, and then I read the sleevenotes and just burst out laughing. I mean, hang on a f***ing minute. . ."

That was Dylan, though. Stipe, too. Utter, spurious nonsense that sounds like it means the world.

"Well, I'm coming to the conclusion that your brain functions more honestly in spurious crap than it does in. . . things like 'My Iron Lung' happen every Saturday, say. The rest of the week it's that spurious crap. When I was much younger, I did this four-track demo, and this girl, a really close friend of mine, listened to it and said 'Your lyrics are crap. They're too honest, too personal, too direct, and there's nothing left to the imagination', and I've had that in the back of my mind ever since. But now I'm starting to reject that, and I want to write that spurious stuff that's coming straight out of my head. There's a song on 'Blood & Chocolate', by Elvis Costello, the one that goes on for yonks. . ."

"Tokyo Storm Warning".

"Yeah. Gibberish! Complete f***ing gibberish. And it's wondrous. Because you open yourself up to that, because that's the way human brains think. I just think Radiohead are in a really dangerous position at the moment, where we could really end up supplying that sense of pathos and angst all the f***ing time, and I think there's a bit more to it than that."

A closing line if ever I've heard one.

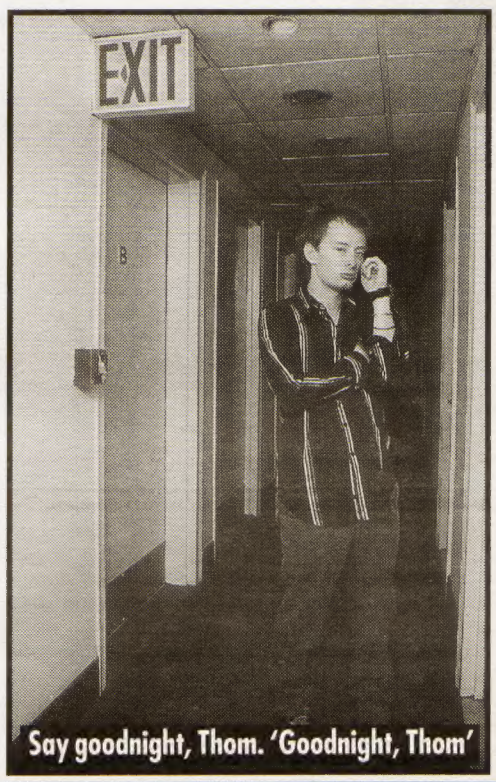
"Mmm. I'm dying for a piss, as well."

"THE Bends" is not doing half the business, in America, or anywhere else, that the "Creep"-fuelled two-million-selling "Pablo Honey" did. Thom reckons this "probably a compliment", and certainly an aid to his continuing sanity. "The Bends" is, however, the Album Of '95 by a yawning margin, a glorious catharsis, a masterpiece of atmosphere, sorrow and redemption. While we're on, "Lucky", from the "Help" charity bash, mixes it with the year's best singles.

The powers that be would rate "The Bends" a disappointment (or, as Ed deadpans, with apologies to Spinal Tap's Ian Faith, "Our appeal is becoming more selective"). Radiohead are happy with it, and they're right to be; this sacrifice of quantity for quality is entirely in keeping with their confident contrariness ("The Bends", as an album, is nothing if not a process of revelling in life's Pyrrhic victories).

"I was talking to someone about this the other night," Thom had said in Hartford, "and we decided that the next record should be a celebration. Because that really would be a challenge for Radiohead."

'Lucky' is out now on Go! Discs



Say goodnight, Thom. 'Goodnight, Thom'